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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIRUT 000757

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: LEBANON: [SPEAKER BERRI PLEASED WITH DOHA AGREEMENT](#)

REF: BEIRUT 754

Classified By: CDA Michele J. Sison for reasons 1.4
(b) and (d).

SUMMARY

11. (C) Speaker Nabih Berri is pleased with the agreement reached at Doha and credits himself with ensuring its success when Arab League representatives appeared to have hit a wall.

He explained that the issue of whether a constitutional amendment was needed to elect Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) Commander General Michel Sleiman as president had been put to bed at last in the agreement.

12. (C) Berri was considering holding a separate parliamentary session on May 25 (presidential election day) to vote on the issue of electoral redistricting, an issue agreed in Doha, deferring debates on other electoral reform issues to a later day. For the next cabinet, Berri was eager to know whether Future Movement leader Saad Hariri or current PM Fouad Siniora would become prime minister. He believed the four most important ministries should go to independent confessional representatives rather than party elites, and expressed a preference for Foreign Affairs for the Shia. End summary.

BERRI TO THE
RESCUE AT DOHA

13. (C) CDA Sison, accompanied by Pol/Econ Chief, met with Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri and his advisor Ali Hamdan at Berri's office in Ain el-Tineh on May 23. A relaxed and seemingly pleased Berri began by relaying his version of the five days of talks in Doha. As of the evening of May 20, no solution had been reached. Qatari PM and FM Hamad bin Jassim (HbJ) left the country along with Arab League SYG Amr Musa, leaving the Lebanese to themselves, at which point Berri reportedly seized his chance to push the talks forward.

14. (C) After various wee hour meetings with Free Patriotic Movement leader Michel Aoun, representatives from Lebanese Forces, and others trying to "complicate" the agreement by inserting new conditions on the electoral law, Berri succeeded in bringing everyone on board by securing an agreement that the law would be decided in parliament using the draft Boutros law as a starting point.

15. (C) Berri claimed having refused getting into discussions

of cabinet portfolios, reportedly limiting the debate to seat distribution, proposing a 10-10-10 "neutral government" as the basis for discussion. He reportedly told HbJ that it was up to the majority to choose the next prime minister. Saudi Arabia's opinion will be key here, he later added.

STARTING DOWN THE
PATH TO ELECTORAL REFORM

¶16. (C) Berri told the Charge he might call a separate parliamentary session on May 25 to approve the portion of the draft Boutros electoral law dealing with districting only, an issue agreed in Doha, leaving electoral reforms to be decided at a later date. He confided that Christians had asked him "under the table" not to reduce the eligible voting age to 18, as this would only exacerbate Christian-Muslim differences in Lebanon. (Note: Given Lebanon's demographics, reducing the age would significantly increase the number of Muslim relative to Christian voters. End note.)

¶17. (C) Agreeing that an independent electoral committee should run the 2009 elections (rather than the Ministry of Interior), Berri wondered aloud whether this also would require a constitutional amendment. He also expressed his support for extending the right to vote to Lebanese abroad, with conditions. Most Lebanese ex-pats are not religiously oriented, he explained, so this would destroy Lebanon's confessional system. Furthermore, most do not see themselves as Lebanese, so we should limit voting rights to those who

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can demonstrate they meet the criteria for citizenship, he suggested. Finally, Berri rejected forming a second chamber, a bicameral system envisioned in the 1989 Taif agreement, laughing that Lebanon had enough problems with one chamber.

WRANGLING OVER
CABINET PORTFOLIOS

¶18. (C) Berri expressed particular interest in who the U.S. believed would be the next prime minister, March 14 majority leader Saad Hariri or current PM Fouad Siniora. He dismissed the possibility of other candidates, and implied that the U.S. and Saudi Arabia were the determining factors in this decision.

¶19. (C) Berri rejected rumors that his Amal party was angling for the Ministry of Defense, insisting that the four sovereign ministries (Foreign Affairs, Finance, Defense, and Interior) should not be held by party elites. The Ministry of the Interior in particular, he stressed, should be held by an independent because of its role in the 2009 legislative elections. Berri professed a preference for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs for the Shia explaining that "whoever takes the Ministry of Finance will be burned" (presumably due to tough financial decisions the GOL will have to address over the coming months). The current and resigned Foreign Minister, Fawzi Salloukh, is a Shia linked to Berri.

CONSTITUTIONAL
AMENDMENT UNNECESSARY

¶10. (C) Berri was unconcerned about opinions that a constitutional amendment is needed before LAF Commander Sleiman can be elected president. Citing Article 74 of the constitution, dealing with the loss of a president due to exceptional circumstances, Berri said this matter had been addressed in the final Doha agreement's language. (Note: The final Doha agreement calls for the Speaker to call for a presidential election session within 24 hours, noting that this is the best method from a constitutional point of view to elect a president under these "exceptional circumstances.")

End note.) Holding up a copy of the Doha agreement, Berri laughed that he had the answer to MP Boutros Harb, who reportedly was refusing to vote for Sleiman absent a constitutional amendment, saying Harb himself had been a signatory to the agreement.

SLEIMAN'S SWEARING IN

¶11. (C) Berri said he had invited UN SYG Ban Ki Moon, currently in Myanmar, to the May 25 election of Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) Commander Michel Sleiman. He also expected the "EU three" (FMs Kouchner, Moratinos and Frattini) to attend, along with EU High Representative for the Common Foreign and Security Policy Javier Solana, Arab dignitaries, including the Qatari Emir and HbJ would attend as well. Berri dismissed rumors of a Syrian delegation, joking, "Who would you like us to invite?" French President Sarkozy planned to visit Lebanon later, after the new cabinet is formed. Berri said Sleiman would begin consultations on cabinet formation on May 27, and he predicted it would take more than a week.

COMMENT

¶12. (C) As usual, Berri credits himself for solving Lebanon's political problems. Boutros Harb is not the only one upset at the Doha agreement's easy dismissal of constitutional procedures (probably due more to his own presidential aspirations than respect for the embattled document). Lebanese Forces MP Georges Adwan reportedly also expressed discontent at Doha, and we can almost hear Michel Aoun's future accusations that the election of Michel Sleiman was illegitimate, although he told Charge earlier today (reftel) there will be no constitutional bar to Sleiman's election. And though Doha achieved just enough agreement on cabinet formation and the electoral law to get the parties to parliament to vote, the wrangling over portfolios and

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necessary reforms has only just begun.

¶13. (C) The Doha agreement, based on the numerous issues and sectarian interests that have been swept under the rug, appears to be a temporary fix, albeit a significant one, to Lebanon's profound political problems, when ultimately more radical surgery will be required to address the underlying issues of Hizballah arms and Lebanon's delicate confessional balance. End comment.

SISON